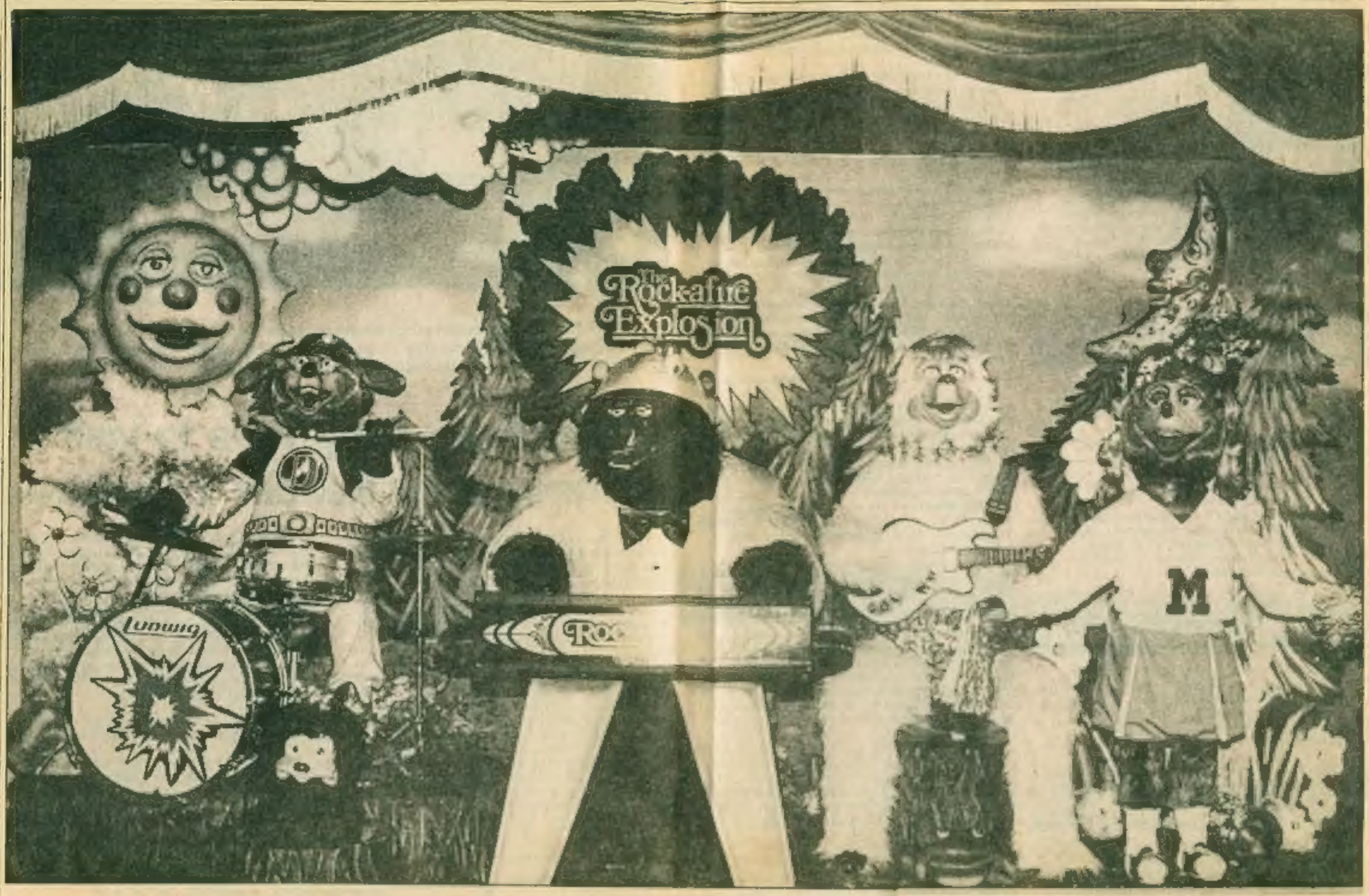

There's no biz like Showbiz

By Dale Parry
People Staff Writer

DAYTON, Ohio — I missed the grand unveiling of television.

People say it was a big deal — the family with the first set on every block suddenly got a multitude of new friends who crowded into their homes to watch the Friday night lights and all.

TV was primitive then, with fuzzy, snowy pictures, wavy lines and frequent technical foul-ups. It was, however, new. It was different and it was promising. It was a status thing to have seen this new generation of entertainment technology, TV, at its pioneer stage.

Well, I was too young. I missed all that. But I've seen the latest generation of entertainment developments: robot entertainers and colander heads. And it was in the most unlikely of off-off-off Broadway theaters: a pizza parlor.

Showbiz Pizza Place is an international chain of nearly 200 "fun centers" which combine food, a beeping bundle of electronic games and a triple-stage show starring animated animals.

The performers aren't quite up to Wayne Newton's standards; they clank and wheeze just a bit and they're not versatile enough to move about or, say, shape their mouths into appropriate formations. But they're a far cry from Robbie the Robot.

The four mainstage characters, members of a mechanical band called The Rock-afire Explosion, all have the voices and — at least roughly — the movements of human beings. Their souls, though, are panels of microchips; their blood streams, air traveling through pneumatic pipelines, all connected by understage plumbing to a tiny computer room at the back of the restaurant.

WHEN SHOWBIZ OPENS, somebody flips on the stage show and that's pretty much it for the day. The computer starts, runs and stops the shows; there are at least half a dozen different ones and never more than three minutes between curtains. When there's a birthday party booked for the showroom, the counter staff flip a switch out front and the computer runs a special birthday show, then goes back to its regular rotation. Pinpoint spotlighting, sound effects, voices, music and motions — more than 43,000 possible character movements from eye blinks to toe taps — all are computer controlled. The staff is free to sell pizza and keep video games operating.

There are 66 things to do at Showbiz: watch television in the Sportsroom, eat, see a stage show or play some of the 62 games in the Gameroom, from the antique (but still popular) Skee-ball to the trendiest state-of-the-art video game, Dragon's Lair.

All these diversions are popular, says Mike Harmon, manager of the Dayton Showbiz, "And I would say our show's the main draw. But it's basically the whole concept that brings people in, being able to get all three — tons of video games, pizza and a show. If we just had pizza and a few games, we'd just be another pizza parlor."

THAT, THEY ARE not.

As early as 3 p.m., Showbiz begins to wind up. By early evening on the weekends, there is a two-hour waiting line.

Once inside, the kids start dragging in their parents, beelining toward the video games and diving headfirst into a swimming pool of plastic balls. In one corner, kids cram into a cartoon viewing booth and in another, they line up behind a video whiz, picking up tips.

In the showroom, the computer has determined it is curtain time again and as the music starts, it drowns out the clunk of Skee-balls banking off the common wall.

It is sheer lunacy, an indoor circus, sure. But if you leave your pride outside, it can be fun.

The stage show on Wednesdays features a tribute to colander heads, the latest Showbiz gimmick. Wear a decorated kitchen colander on your head and get two free game tokens and a soft drink. The Rock-afire Explosion is appropriately dressed for the freebies, colanders one and all.

The shows are changed every few weeks. Right now they're running a bit with Buddy Holly music, among others. About the only consistent element is the humor. It is vintage cornball.

FATZ (the center stage gorilla): "Now that I think of it, Dook, I might have married that girl."

DOOK (the dog-like drummer): "Well, why didn't you?"

FATZ: "I said I might have. I don't know. I can't remember."

Kids in the showroom shriek laughter.

FATZ AGAIN: "I wouldn't marry no pretty girl."

DOOK: "Why not?"

FATZ: "Pretty girl will leave you."

DOOK: "So will a homely girl."

FATZ: "Yeah, but who cares?"

It's like that.

IT'S LIKE BLACK and white television — the first ones. It's a little rough around the edges, but it's a start. There are a several other companies, like the Chuck E. Cheese pizza parlors, which are experimenting with mechanical entertainers. The technology is improving, with characters becoming more life-like in every generation.

Robot entertainers someday may be

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good enough to replace live performers. (Why not? They're cheap, they're never sick and they don't go on strike.) The Showbiz robots aren't the Rockettes. But their show, like the entire Showbiz Pizza Place experience, is amusing. And encouraging.

Oh, and the pizza's not bad, either.

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